

Speech by Simone Veil (Strasbourg, 17 July 1979)

Caption: On 17 July 1979, during the first session of the first directly-elected European Parliament, Simone Veil, the newly-elected President of the European Parliament, delivers a speech which throws the spotlight on the Parliament's role as the driving force in the quest for European integration.

Source: Debates of the European Parliament. Sitting of Wednesday, 18 July 1979. 1979. Luxembourg. "Speech by Simone Veil (Strasbourg, 17 July 1979)", p. 20-24.

Copyright: All rights of reproduction, public communication, adaptation, distribution or dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

The documents available on this Web site are the exclusive property of their authors or right holders.

Requests for authorisation are to be addressed to the authors or right holders concerned.

Further information may be obtained by referring to the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/speech_by_simone_veil_strasbourg_17_july_1979-en-174d384d-d5c7-4c02-ad78-b1f6efc9740a.html

Last updated: 14/05/2014

Speech by Simone Veil (Strasbourg, 17 July 1979)

Ladies and gentlemen, you have done me a signal honour in electing me President of the European Parliament, and my emotions on taking the chair are deeper than I can put into words. First of all, I should like to thank all of those who voted for me. I shall endeavour to be the President they would wish me to be. True to the spirit of democracy, I shall also seek to be the President of the whole Assembly.

Today's sitting is being held in a setting with which many of you are familiar, but it is none the less an historic occasion. This doubtless explains the presence of the many distinguished guests who have accepted our invitations. I am sorry that I cannot mention them all by name, but on behalf of each and every Member of this House I bid them welcome.

We are highly honoured by the presence of many Presidents and Speakers of the Parliaments of associated and other countries, representing the nations of five continents. By coming here today, they have shown how much importance they attach to relations with our Parliament, thus lending invaluable support to our democratic enterprise. We greatly appreciate your acceptance of our invitations and your gesture of friendship and solidarity, and I should like to convey to you our special thanks.

Yesterday evening I expressed the gratitude we owe to Louise Weiss, who so ably guided our first steps. I should like to add, with your indulgence, one further word and mention her outstanding contribution to the struggle waged in the cause of the emancipation of women.

It is my duty, but also an honour, to pay tribute to the previous Assembly, and more particularly to its presidents, who presided over it with such great authority. I should particularly like to stress the honour due to President Colombo who so ably filled this chair, and earned universal esteem for the manner in which he discharged this difficult task.

In its work ever since the first European Community, the Coal and Steel Community, was set up, and particularly since the establishment of the single Assembly of the Communities in 1958, the European Parliament has played a major and increasingly important part in the building of Europe. However new a departure its election by direct universal suffrage provides, our Assembly is first and foremost the heir to the parliamentary assemblies which have gone before it. It follows on in the path traced by those who have sat in this House from the time when, a generation ago, the European and the democratic ideal were brought together.

Its beginnings were modest and discreet, in keeping with the limited powers conferred on it by the Treaty of Rome, but through the growing political influence it has gradually acquired, the European Parliament has consolidated its role among the institutions and in the building of the Community. It was this growing influence which led to the signing of the Treaties of 21 April 1970 and 22 July 1975 which strengthened the Assembly's budgetary powers. Furthermore, through a number of practical arrangements, the part played by the Assembly in the exercise of the Community's responsibilities has been given sharper form and wider scope.

We in the new parliament will not lose sight of these achievements of our predecessors. None of us will forget their contribution to the attainment of the hopes of the founding fathers of the Community for an ever-closer union between the peoples of Europe.

While we cannot forget the substantial achievements of the Assemblies which preceded us, I must now lay full emphasis on the fundamentally new departure that has been made by the European Communities in having their Parliament elected for the first time by direct universal suffrage.

For this is the first time in history, a history in which we have so frequently been divided, pitted one against the other, bent on mutual destruction, that the people of Europe have together elected their delegates to a common assembly representing, in this Chamber today, more than 260 million people. Let there be no doubt, these elections form a milestone on the path of Europe, the most important since the signing of the

Treaties. It is true that the electoral systems still vary from one Member State to the other — and this was laid down in the Act of 20 September 1976 on the election of representatives to the Assembly by direct universal suffrage — and it will be for us to draw up a uniform electoral system for future elections. This is a task to which, along with you, I shall devote my energies.

Whatever our political beliefs, we are all aware that this historic step, the election of the European Parliament by universal suffrage, has been taken at a crucial time for the people of the Community. All its Member States are faced with three great challenges: the challenge of peace, the challenge of freedom and the challenge of prosperity, and it seems clear that they can only be met through the European dimension.

(Applause)

Let us begin with the challenge of peace. In a world where the balance of power has enabled us so far to avoid the suicidal cataclysm of armed conflict between the superpowers, localized wars have, in contrast, proliferated. The period of peace we have enjoyed in Europe has been an exceptional piece of good fortune, but we should none of us underestimate its fragility. Is there any need to stress the novelty of this situation in Europe, whose history is a long chapter of fratricidal and bloody wars?

Like its forerunners, our Assembly has, whatever our differences, a fundamental responsibility for maintaining this peace, which is probably the most precious asset in all Europe.

The tension prevailing in the world today makes this responsibility an even heavier one, and the legitimacy bestowed on our Assembly by its election by universal suffrage will, let us hope, help us to bear it, and spread this peace of ours to the outside world.

The second basic challenge is that of freedom. The frontiers of totalitarianism have spread so far that the islands of freedom are surrounded by regimes in which force prevails. Our Europe is one such island; let us welcome the fact that Greece, Spain and Portugal, with traditions as old as our own, have joined the ranks of the free countries.

(Applause)

The Community will be happy to receive them. Here too, the European dimension should help to strengthen that freedom whose value is too often not realized until it has been lost.

Finally, Europe has to meet the great challenge of prosperity, by which I mean the threat to the living standards of our peoples posed by the basic upheaval which, over the past five years, the oil crisis has both sparked off and revealed in its full dimensions. After experiencing for a generation a rapid and steady rise in living standards without precedent in history, every country in Europe is now faced with a kind of economic warfare which has brought the return of that forgotten plague, unemployment, and jeopardize the rise in living standards. This upheaval is leading to far-reaching change. In our different countries, everyone is fully aware that change is inevitable but at the same time fears it. Everyone expects guarantees, safeguards and reassuring action from the governments and elected representatives, at both national and European level.

We all know that these challenges, which are being felt throughout Europe with equal intensity, can only be effectively met through solidarity. Beside the superpowers, only Europe as a whole is capable of taking the necessary action which is beyond its individual members in isolation. However, in order to take effective action the European Communities must unite and gather strength. The European Parliament, now elected that it is by direct universal suffrage, will in future bear a special responsibility. If the challenges facing Europe are to be met, we need a Europe capable of solidarity, of independence and of cooperation.

By a Europe of solidarity I mean solidarity among peoples, regions and individuals. In the relations between our peoples there can be no question of overriding or neglecting the fundamental national interests of each of the Community Member States. However, it is undoubtedly true that, very often, the interests of all are better served by European solutions than by persistent opposition. While no country can consider itself

exempt from the discipline and effort now demanded at national level by the new economic constraints, our Assembly must nevertheless continually press for a reduction of existing disparities since a deterioration of the situation would destroy the unity of the Common Market and, with it, the privileged position of some of its members.

Social solidarity, in other words the smoothing out of economic and sometimes financial inequalities, is also required if regional disparities are to be reduced. The Community has already taken practical and effective action in this field. It should continue to pursue this policy as long as the results are in proportion to the expenditure.

Policy must also be adapted in order to redress not only the situation, in the traditionally depressed regions, but also that of regions considered up to quite recently as strong and prosperous but now stricken by economic disasters.

Finally, and most important of all, solidarity between men must be fostered. Despite the real, and indeed remarkable, progress achieved in this area over the past few decades, much remains to be done. However, at a time when all citizens will undoubtedly be required to accept the fact that the rise in the standard of living must come to a halt or progress more slowly, and also to accept a brake on the growth of social expenditure, the necessary sacrifices will not be made unless there is a genuine reduction in social inequalities.

(Applause)

The principal objective of the measures to be taken in this field, both at Community and national level, is employment. Our Assembly must consider in depth the new situation where demand is increasing at a greater pace than supply. This is producing frustrations, and a combination of measures such as productive investments, the protection of the more vulnerable European activities and regulations on working conditions will be necessary in order to improve the situation.

Our Europe must also be a Europe of independence. This must not be an aggressive independence liable to end in conflicts, but Europe must determine the conditions of its development in its own way. This is particularly true in such matters as monetary and energy policy.

Of note in the monetary field is the major political significance for Europe of the recent setting up of the European Monetary System, designed to restore stable monetary relations within the Community, which has been affected over the past few years by the instability of the dollar, even when this was foreseeable.

In the field of energy, dependence on the oil producers is a major handicap for Europe. In order to restore the conditions which are essential for our independence, the Assembly might be well advised to call upon the European Governments to proclaim in this House their desire for cooperation and concertation — a desire which is belatedly beginning to become apparent. We must also further promote energy-saving measures and the search for new forms of energy.

Finally, the Europe which we advocate must be a Europe of cooperation. The Community has already established, in the field of relations with the developing countries, a form of cooperation which is in many respects exemplary. A new step in this cooperation has recently been taken through the latest negotiations with the associated countries. The Community now hopes that the new Convention of Lomé will be signed by all the countries which took part in those negotiations.

Although the new world economic situation necessitates a strengthening of this policy of cooperation, it also requires us to take account of the growing disparities evident among the developing countries themselves, depending on whether they are producers of raw materials. Within the framework of this selective cooperation, Europe must be able to obtain the raw materials necessary for its activities, to offer its partners equitable revenues and balance the necessary transfers of technology with safeguards ensuring that its industries can compete under equitable conditions.

Because it has been elected by universal suffrage and will derive a new authority from that election, this Parliament will have a special role to play in enabling the European Community to attain these objectives and so prove equal to the challenges facing it. The historic election of June 1979 has raised hopes — tremendous hopes — in Europe. Our electors would not forgive us if we failed to take up this heavy but infinitely rewarding responsibility.

The European Parliament must exercise this responsibility in all its deliberations.

(Applause)

I should, however, like to stress the extent to which, in my view, this new authority will prompt Parliament to intensify its action on two fronts; firstly, by performing its function of control more democratically, and secondly, by acting as a more effective motive force in European integration.

(Applause)

The directly-elected European Parliament will be able fully to perform its function of democratic control, which is the prime function of any elected Assembly.

In particular, given the powers conferred upon it by the Treaties, the European Parliament has the task of authorizing the budget on behalf of the citizens of the Community. Henceforth in the Community, as in all the Member States, it is the Assembly elected by the people that adopts the budget. The budget is the most important act over which this Parliament has specific powers, being able to amend it or reject it in its entirety.

I want to stress the importance of the budgetary dialogue at its various stages, from the drawing up of the draft budget right through to its final adoption. This is a complex and lengthy procedure, involving deadlines and a 'shuttle' between the Council and the Assembly, but this complexity and two-way traffic are counterbalanced by the opportunity to make our voice heard.

However, this can only hold good if certain conditions are met: the first is our presence throughout this process, as our presence is essential. Secondly, our strength will clearly be all the greater if we are in agreement among ourselves and take care not to indulge in demagoguery but keep our feet firmly on the ground.

The first task on the programme of this Parliament will be to take the first reading of the preliminary draft budget for 1980, which we are to examine very shortly.

In a more general appraisal of the exercise of the budgetary powers of the directly-elected Parliament, it seems to me that one point deserves emphasis. A responsible Parliament should not confine itself, when drawing up the budget, to the adoption of a given volume of expenditure, but must also examine the collection of revenue. This is perfectly consistent with the democratic calling of this Parliament. History teaches us that the world's first parliaments stemmed from the authorization to levy taxes.

The urgency of this consideration is heightened by the fact that, during the life of this Parliament, the European Community budget will reach the ceiling of 1 % of VAT revenue laid down in the Treaties, for the collection of own resources. In the years to come, the problem of revenue must thus remain in the forefront of our minds, and this Parliament, representing as it does all the citizens and thus all the taxpayers of the Community, will necessarily be called upon to make a leading contribution to the solution of this problem.

(Applause)

Parliament must also be an organ of control of general policy within the Community. Let us not be deluded into believing that the strictly institutional limitations on its powers can prevent a Parliament such as ours from speaking out at all times, and in every field of Community action, with the political authority conferred

on it by its election.

(Applause)

Our Parliament must also be a motive force in European integration. This is particularly true at a time when, as I already have mentioned, Europe's prime need is a further measure of solidarity. This new Parliament will make it possible for the views of all Community citizens to be voiced at European level, and will at the same time more effectively impress upon every sector of society the need for a solidarity transcending immediate concerns, however legitimate, which must never be allowed to mask the fundamental interests of the Community.

We are, of course, aware of the existing allocation of powers in the Community, which confers autonomy on each institution. The Treaties attribute the right of initiative to the Commission and legislative power to the Council. The autonomy of each of the institutions, which is so necessary to the proper functioning of the Communities, does not prevent these institutions from essentially working together with one another and it is within the context of this cooperation that the fresh impetus provided by the newly acquired legitimacy of this Assembly must be turned into an effective driving force.

Our Parliament will therefore play its part in promoting European progress most effectively by strengthening cooperation with the other institutions. It should do so not only when its advice is sought — and here there are no limits that apply — but also under the new conciliation procedure, which should enable Parliament to participate effectively in the legislative decisions of the Communities.

(Applause)

The voice of our Assembly, confident in its newly acquired legitimacy, will be heard by all the Community authorities and, more especially, at the highest level of political decision-making. Here I am thinking in particular of the European Council.

(Applause)

As is only natural and normal in a democratic assembly such as ours, we differ on the programmes which we wish to implement, on the ideas which we wish to advocate and even on the very role we are to play.

Let us, however, avoid the error of turning our Assembly into a forum for rivalry and dissent. Too often in the past, public opinion in our countries has gained the impression that the European Communities are hamstrung institutions, incapable of reaching decisions within the necessary time-limits.

Our Parliament will entirely fulfil the hopes which it has raised if, far from being the sounding-board for the internal divisions of Europe, it succeeds in articulating and bringing home to the Community the spirit of solidarity that is so necessary today.

As far as I am concerned, I intend to devote my entire time and energies to the task before us. I am not unaware of the fact that, although we are the offspring of a common civilization and are fashioned by a culture that drew nourishment from the same sources, we do not necessarily have either the same idea of society or the same aspirations.

However, I am convinced that the pluralist nature of our Assembly can serve to enrich our work and not act as a brake on the continuing construction of Europe. Whatever our differences of temperament, I feel that we share the same desire to achieve a Community founded on a common heritage and the shared respect for fundamental human values. In this spirit I invite you to embark in fraternal fashion on the work that awaits us.

At the end of our term of office, I trust that we shall share the feeling that we have advanced the cause of Europe. I trust that, above all, we shall have fully responded to the hopes that this Assembly arouses, not

only among the people of Europe but also among all those throughout the world who prize peace and liberty.

(Loud applause)

[...]